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ABSTRACT

In the context of recent reappraisals of women's education and discussions about what it should be, and as part of the effort to clarify the purposes of collegiate education that may be unique to women, the students and faculty at Smith College, the largest undergraduate college for women, were surveyed. The questionnaire used was designed to explore the appeal to various rationales for the existence of separate women's colleges. The results of the survey are presented in summary tables, and the discussion centers on the most popular purpose for this population: "to encourage women to create their own self-identities." The specific issue addressed is whether or not this purpose requires abandonment of the traditional aims of liberal arts education. The conclusion of the authors is that it does not, although it calls for a redefinition of what constitutes the highest levels of development for women. Several other statements of purpose such as preparation for careers and encouraging achievement in women are discussed briefly. A compensatory model for women's education is questioned on both ethical and logical grounds. (Author/MSE)

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WOMEN'S EDUCATION: A SURVEY OF PURPOSES AT A LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE FOR WOMEN

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Women's education, like other aspects of women's lives, has been under scrutiny in the 1970's. Not since the initial struggle for access to higher education has there been such an intensive examination of women's education. These recent reappraisals have grown out of the women's movement and demands for additional opportunities and rights on the part of women.

In addition to demands for opportunities and rights, the issue of whether or not women's education ought to be different from men's has been raised anew. The focus this time has not been on whether or not women are too physically fragile to study Greek or whether or not women's education should include courses on domestic management. Rather the focus has been on the unique aspects of women's development and on the changing roles of women in society. In this context, there have been efforts to "broaden and deepen our understanding of the relationship between women's education and their development" (Westervelt, 1972).

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In seeking to clarify the purposes of collegiate education which may be unique to women, we surveyed the views of students and faculty at the largest undergraduate college for women. Although women's colleges are becoming increasingly rare, we purposely chose to study such an institution for several reasons. The reexamination of purposes and goals for women's education which has taken place over the last decade has been particularly intense at women's colleges. These colleges have sought to justify their continued existence in the face of powerful social and economic forces against them. A second reason is that women's colleges have played an important role historically in the search for the optimal undergraduate experience for women, and therefore should not be ignored in the current reappraisals. More generally, it was assumed that an examination of the special purposes of a women's college as seen by those who live and work in them might reveal issues which are critical to the education of women in all types of institutions.

The major focus of this paper will be on the popular purposes from the questionnaire which have important implications for the college surveyed. Since reexaminations of this sort always portend change, the discussion will center on the extent to which the most popular purpose on the questionnaire represents a new goal for liberal arts education. Two other popular purposes will be discussed more briefly in light of women's demands and aspirations and in light of traditional views of liberal arts education. We end with some findings which have particular significance for the institution studied.

Survey

Questionnaires were sent to approximately 2700 faculty, undergraduate and graduate students at Smith College in February, 1976. The questionnaire was designed to explore the appeal of various rationales for the existence of separate women's colleges. Respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they felt separate colleges for women were justified in a general sense. Then they were asked to check which of twenty-five purpose statements they viewed as valid justifications for separate women's colleges and rank the three they thought were most important. Since the list of possible purposes was intended to be extensive but not exhaustive, respondents were also given a chance to write-in additional purposes. Background demographic information was also collected. (See Appendix for questionnaire and transmittal letter.)

Forty-eight percent of the college community (n=1299) returned the questionnaire within two weeks. Except for graduate students who account for less than 5% of the student population, the return rate from faculty and the classes was similar. (Freshmen = 49%; Sophomore = 47.5%; Juniors = 45%; Seniors = 52%; Graduate Students = 37%; Faculty = 49%.)

All twenty-five purposes offered on the questionnaire received some support as the most important reason. Generally, however, respondents emphasized the unique personal and academic growth possibilities at women's colleges. The historical reason of equal educational opportunity, the traditional purpose of preparation for conventional female roles, and radical calls for a reconceptualization of society and women's roles were all less popular.

Agreement with purposes ranged from a high of 79% for the argument that women's colleges are justified because they can "help women to create their own self-identity" to a low of 10% who thought these colleges are justified because they develop "a talented, well-educated group of future wives and mothers."

(SEE TABLE I)

In the preferential choices, the following justifications received the highest weighted rankings[1]: (1) "to encourage women to create their own self-identity,"(2) "to teach women to take themselves seriously and respect and support each other,"(3) "to prepare women for careers and entry into the professions."

(SEE TABLE II)

Discussion

The most popular purpose among the Smith College respondents was "Encouraging women to create their own self-identities." For students and for female faculty, this was seen as the most important rationale for a women's college, and by extension, perhaps, an important purpose for women's education in other settings, as well.

This purpose statement, while vague in some respects, does indicate that personal or self-development of students should be a purpose of education. And, at this college, there is considerable sentiment that the institution should assist women directly in this process. To what extent does this purpose imply change for this college and for institutions still committed to the liberal arts tradition?

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[1] Each first choice was multiplied by three; second choice by two; and third choice by one. Points for each item were summed to yield the weighted rankings.

The mention of self-identity and self-development in recent years has taken on the connotation of anti-intellectualism and a renunciation of notions of social responsibility. This has lead to the statement and restatement of strong arguments that the proper domain of education, even liberal arts education, is the intellect or learning and not personal development (e.g. Ebel, 1976).

The idea of personal development as an essential feature of liberal arts education has a long history, however. Such a view is part of classical statements of the purpose of education (e.g. Locke and Herbart) and is represented in the views of many current writers who call for a renewal of liberal arts education. Among their goal statements are many which are not strictly intellectual or cognitive, such as the development of "judgment and values" (Bok, 1974); the development of a curious and creative person, "an ethical individual," "a wholesome, well-adjusted human being," "an active and sensitive citizen" (Stiles, 1976).

In more recent history, we have lost sight of the aims of a liberal arts education with regard to personal development. And while some applaud this, maintaining that education cannot play a significant role in the creation of the free and liberated person, others reject this view.

Those who reject this view point to forces both inside and outside the academy which have undermined both the faith and the goal. Shoben (1976) focuses on three processes within the academy--"the development of graduate schools and the professionalization of scholarship," the specialization of the academic disciplines to the degree that they no longer lend themselves to the goals of personal transformation, and, finally, the related result that the professor's role is restricted primarily to the occupational development of students. Shoben sees these changes as taking place at a point in our cultural history which is between two major revolutions--the industrial revolution and the post-industrial revolution.

Felix Gilbert (1974) sees similar forces at work in the abandonment of personal development as an important aim of education. In his analysis he focuses on our failure to distinguish Higher Education from higher learning. The process of Higher Education, as distinguished from higher learning, requires a vision of an ideal person, along with the belief that study at the college is a means which leads to the realization of this ideal.

Rapid advances in the natural sciences have shattered our old images of man. And, the failure of education, in Gilbert's view, has been the failure to continue asking the question. The question is the meaning of man in the new universe. The basic purpose of education has thus been overshadowed by the demands and goals of science and technology.

If we accept the premise that education should be guided by an ideal image of the person, what does this imply for the education of women at this point in our history?

Scientific advances have indeed challenged our normative image of woman. The images of woman which have guided education in the past are being rejected, however, not simply because they have been torn apart by technological advances, but because they are and have been restricted and stereotyped visions.

Recent historical interpretations of women's education (Conway, 1974; Wein, 1974) reveal that the image of woman as dedicated to the home and family has dominated women's education for a good deal of our history. The social good deriving from the education of women has consistently been more persuasive in gaining women access to education than the principle of human rights (Newcomer, 1959). Much less frequently has education been viewed as valuable per se in the lives of women or as enabling women to perform a greater

variety of roles in the society.

The purpose statement on the questionnaire which is most similar to this traditional image is, "to develop a talented, well-educated group of future wives and mothers"(Y). This was the least popular purpose among the Smith College respondents; and a related purpose, "to prepare women for roles which are compensatory to men's roles"(T) was among tne less popular.

If we assume that at the current time there is little agreement on the ideal image of woman and that such an image is necessary to guide higher education, as distinct from higher learning, how does higher education proceed?

In this situation, one approach is for faculty and students at colleges and the liberal arts divisions of universities to search for an answer to the question of what is the meaning of woman and man in the context of the modern age. Higher education, which is devoted to the development of the person, need not abandon its purpose in this instance. The search for and exploration of alternative images of woman and man becomes more critical in periods of cultural life when there is no set of values which is widely accepted and there is a lack of consensus about the characteristics of the ideal person.

The writings of Kohlberg and other contemporary advocates of development as a purpose of education might serve as a modern guide in the search for ideal images. But, though our knowledge and conceptions of development are more sophisticated than they were fifty years ago, our ideas about human development still require further elaboration both in terms of the philosophic rationales which must accompany the specifications of "more adequate" stages of development and in terms of empirical evidence about the facts of

development (Kohlberg and Mayer, 1972).

For instance, there is an almost exclusively cognitive emphasis in the earlier statements of the developmental view. The focus has been broadened more recently to include moral development. At the very end of their 1972 statement on development as the aim of education, Kohlberg and Mayer suggest that the concept of ego development provides an ever broader unity including not only cognitive and moral development, but also social emotional content--the organization of self-concept and social experience. A concept of development which includes cognitive, moral, and emotional content may be a more adequate formulation of the process of development than one which includes cognition alone.

Continued examination and revision of both the philosophic rationales and empirical evidence about "more adequate" stages of development is particularly critical in light of the fact that women's development has been ignored or seen as deviant historically. Women's development must now be studied from a value position which is positive. Freeman (1977) suggests this as a "more adequate" ethical principle for studying women's development than one which is negative or neutral. More adequate statements of the universal stages of development cannot be formulated without studying female development from a position which is valuing of females.

Not all purposes for women's education are positively or equally valuing of women. For instance the purpose "to compensate for the cultural forces which may limit women's intellectual and general development" (G), which was endorsed by 57% of the Smith College respondents and was the most popular purpose among the male faculty, bears a resemblance to the compensatory education view of the 1960's.

An assumption of female inferiority may underlie such a purpose. Even if this is not the case, this purpose statement contains what Kohlberg and Mayer (1972) call the "psychologist's fallacy," namely it assumes that what is, presumably that which is currently normative for male development, ought to be, for females as well as males.

Some question exists as to whether or not there can be or should be a single andogenous ideal for both males and females (Davis, 1976). Educators of women should take this point seriously. This issue requires both ethical elaboration and empirical investigation. The possibility that different experiences and meanings are involved in the development of males and females from one developmental stage to another, even if the stages are identical, has considerable philosophic and empirical support at this time (Tidball, 1976; Block, 1973).

These gaps in the evidence and historical faults in our formulations of cultural ideals must be given serious attention in any effort which includes personal development as a major goal in the education of women.

Granting acceptance of this purpose as consistent with the traditional aims of liberal arts education suggests that college communities should begin to search for ideal images of woman and man which can be justified philosophically and which are consistent with the facts of development. In this process, institutions of higher education may indeed contribute to the personal development of their students. The popularity of this purpose in the college surveyed, certainly suggests this as an important possibility for the institution to consider.

Two other popular purpose statements from the questionnaire deserve a similar analysis in terms of the state of the world, traditional purposes of higher education, and the value assumptions about females which underlie them. These are, "to prepare women for careers and entry into the professions" (D) and "to provide an environment where women are not afraid to achieve" (C). Some of the questions, which surround these purposes, will be pointed to here.

Preparing women for careers and professions revives the familiar tension between general education and vocational education, referred to, respectively as higher education and higher learning, in the discussion above. The resolution of this tension must now include the fact that many women desire to be economically independent; many women desire to participate in all levels of our vocational and career structure. In the Smith College survey, preparing women for careers and entry into the professions was seen as an important purpose of a women's college by approximately 60% of the students.

In addition, institutions must take into account that for most of our history, women as a group, have been excluded from the highest levels of the career and status structures. Not even the elite women's colleges have ever been able to make the assumption made by the elite men's colleges, that their graduates would automatically move into positions of power in the society (Ward, 1977).

Is this emphasis on careers and entry into the professions unique to students choosing a women's college or part of a more general trend? Should institutions of higher education attempt some new resolution of the conflict between personal transformation and vocational aims? Can these be reconciled in such a way that women can attain both the highest levels

of human development and the highest levels of vocational and career development?

The question of women's achievement, both in terms of its definition and the situations which foster or retard it, remains a tangled question, in spite of recent research in this area. Women's achievement is usually discussed in terms of scholarly, academic, or artistic achievement and in terms of power in the society. Occasionally, the question of society's devaluing of women's traditional roles and achievements, which results from the general devaluing of females, is raised (Bakan, 1966). Success for many college women has become synonomous with achievement in the previously male-dominated professions of law and medicine or business. What impact can higher education have on these issues? Should institutions of higher education encourage and attempt to promote particular kinds of achievement? Should it address the general cultural devaluing of women and the resulting self-devaluing by women? There is evidence that the population surveyed believes this college should confront these issues. "To teach women to take themselves seriously and respect and support each other" (B) was the second most popular purpose among this group. "Helping women gain self-confidence" (E), which has similar implications, was also a popular choice.

Does either this purpose or the vocational purpose demand a renunciation of development, in the broadest sense, as a major purpose of women's education?

For women's colleges the compensatory purpose must be addressed before these other purposes. The compensatory view, accepted by almost sixty percent of the Smith community, may not only carry an underlying assumption of inferiority, but is essentially a

"self-destruct" purpose. If accepted, this remedial view and its concomitant limited time frame becomes determining of other purposes. If, on the other hand, women's colleges view their existence as permanent and self-justified, then a wider range of purposes can be considered.

Though only a few of the purpose statements have been discussed here, many questions have been raised. Some of these demand and are amenable to scholarly inquiry; others can only be addressed by priority-establishing discussions. From this survey, it appears that students and female faculty and male faculty would begin such discussions with somewhat different visions of the college's mission. One cannot assume homogeneity of views on basic issues even among those who choose to live and work in a women's college. For instance, in this survey we find that although female faculty and students are in general agreement when ranking the purposes, male faculty and students had similar views on the relative importance of approximately one-third of the purpose statements. This may be a situation which is peculiar to this college and this generation or to women's colleges, though this seems unlikely. Consensus about the purpose of women's education will not be easy to achieve even in this special environment, and the mere popularity of an idea is not a rationale for changing a college's direction.

Examination of these issues is important, however, and is an activity which should not be limited to women's institutions. The dialogue itself has intrinsic validity, and it can be of practical importance in determining future curricular and institutional policies.

TABLE I

Questionnaire Results Spring 1976

JUSTIFICATIONS

..."Please check all the reasons which you personally think justify the existence of separate liberal arts colleges for women."

79% A. to encourage women to create their own identity.

63% B. "to teach women to take themselves seriously and respect and support each other."

63% C. to provide an environment where women are not afraid to achieve.

60% D. to prepare women for careers and entry into the professions.

59% E. to help women gain self-confidence.

59% F. to provide a quality undergraduate experience for women at various ages.

57% G. to compensate for the cultural forces which may limit women's intellectual and general development.

52% H. to prepare women for a life of scholarship, "independent and self-justifying intellectual endeavor."

51% I. to foster women's sociability: the opportunity to experience the value of women friends and to develop life-long friendships.

51% J. to enable women to develop or exercise leadership skills without male competition for leadership positions.

45% K. to provide an opportunity for women to discover themselves and each other intellectually, socially and sexually in an atmosphere that is for the most part free of male presence and male dominance.

44% L. to create a community in which women have to be treated as first class citizens.

43% M. to help women become less dependent upon men.

43% N. to offer institutional variety which is valuable per se.

35% O. to provide a rigorous education for women patterned on quality institutions for men.

Table I (continued)

33% P. to provide "forms of collective life which are most supportive of and conducive to learning for women students."

29% Q. to act as the academic and intellectual component of the women's movement, providing a systemic enquiry into women's experience.

29% R. to maintain the quality of existing women's institutions which might have difficulty attracting equally qualified male students if they become coeducational.

24% S. to prepare women to meet the challenge of combining profession, marriage and child-rearing.

22% T. to prepare women for roles which are compensatory to men's roles.

20% U. to enable women to escape the daily pressures of dating and focusing on heterosexual relationships.

20% V. to form the basis for a radical reconceptualization of our social structure.

11% W. "to preserve and perfect every characteristic of complete womanhood."

11% X. to actively support the feminist movement.

10% Y. to develop a talented, well-educated group of future wives and mothers.

5% Z. Other Reasons

TABLE II

Most Important Justifications

Respondents were asked to rank the three reasons which seemed most important to them. (The letters refer to the questionnaire items listed in Table I.)

	FIRST	SECOND	THIRD
Female faculty	Self-identity (A)	Respect Women (B)	Achievement (C)
Male faculty	Compensatory Model (G)	Institutional Variety (N) and Career Preparation (D)	Quality Male Institution (O)
Graduate Students	Self-identity (A)	Achievement (C) and Respect Women (B)	Male Absence (K)
Seniors	Self-identity (A)	Respect Women (B)	Male Absence (K)
Juniors	Self-identity (A)	Career Preparation (D)	Male Absence (K)
Sophomores	Self-identity (A)	Respect Women (B)	Career Preparation (D)
Freshmen	Self-identity (A)	Career Preparation (D)	Achievement (C)
Total	Self-identity (A)	Respect Women (B)	Career Preparation (D)

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